

## **Mentoring rural women – Challenges and Achievements of Kudumbashree NRO mentors**

Rural women are often considered as the invisible lifeline of the country. Their contribution is integral to the development of rural economy and hence addressing critical issues like strengthening their capabilities, increasing their access to opportunities and resources, nurturing their leadership and enhancing the strength of their agency becomes fundamental. It is with the same mandate of addressing poverty through concredited actions, Kudumbashree was set up in the year 1998. It has been a movement that has altered the lives of lakhs of women not only in Kerala but is slowly making inroads in the lives of countless families outside Kerala as well. Since 2013, Kudumbashree NRO has been providing technical support to more than 19 partner states, in two major domains- PRI-CBO convergence and enterprise promotion.

One of the most remarkable features of the programme is that the work in these states is primarily driven by a group of former CDS chairpersons and resource persons from the existing Kudumbashree network. For the purpose of implementing these projects in partner states, the organization has trained and placed more than 120 resource persons who have the responsibility to provide regular handholding support to the local cadre in both the domains. These resource persons, commonly called as Mentors are backbone of the project as they represent the organization in partner states and work for fulfilling projects goals. These are women having several years of experience of working closely with the panchayat for implementing several poverty alleviation schemes and programs. Mentors have shown extraordinary abilities

in adapting the local culture, learning the local language and often adjusting to the dismal conditions in the partner states to drive the project and achieve the desired goals. Some of these mentors started their journey from being forced to leave their house to make their ends meet to being selected as mentors to travel across states to support their family's income.

### **Challenges and achievements of mentors**

Mentors have to face innumerable challenges which start right from their immersion and subsequent training programs. As part of the immersion they are sent to partner states where most often they are unfamiliar with the local conditions and the culture. Many of the mentors are only aware of Hindi and have no knowledge of the local language which can be a major barrier in developing a relationship with the community. With persistent efforts they try to adapt with the local culture and build relationships. Along with this, they are also given the responsibility of getting in touch with the panchayat and understanding the schemes and programs targeting the poor.

Once they start their work, these mentors work closely with the local people, develop local resource persons, train them and empower them through knowledge. One of the mentors, Tulasi, who had been working in Assam under the PRI-CBO Convergence domain, shared that she realised that the local women lacked proper guidance. She added that it was not just the citizens but even the elected representatives lacked awareness. As a mentor she decided that rather than imposing her views on the community cadre, she decided to guide them through discussions and help them develop their own methods of dealing with local issues. This was a learning experience for her as well. She added that as someone who guided the local resource group, she feels happy

when they come and inform her that they have gained respect not only at home but also from the community at large.

Gram Sabhas conducted in each panchayaths are an integral mechanism wherein elected representatives and community members gather to deliberate and debate on various issues affecting the people. Before the project started, many of the panchayats in partner states did not conduct regular gram sabhas. Even if it was conducted, the participation levels were very limited. Getting the local women out of their homes and mobilizing them to work for their own good has always been one of the pressing challenges faced by mentors. Women in most of these partner states belong to some of the most backward areas and often do not venture out of their houses. In some cases, the sarpanch (panchayat president) will be a female member but the duties and the functions will be performed by her husband. In such situations, mobilizing women to work for their own good is a big challenge. This is mostly done through constant interactions, organizing activities like rallies, training programs, group discussions and even by being part of their daily routines. Sasikala A., one of the mentors working under the PRI-CBO convergence domain in Assam shared that she had faced difficult situations on the field owing to communal tensions. Moreover, Laharighat, the block where she worked, was a place prone to incessant floods. Overcoming such challenges and organizing gram sabhas and even special meetings was one of the most important achievements for her during her stint as a mentor in the state. ***“We could organize a gaon sabha in a limited span of time. SHGs and VOs\* came together on a single day for a special meeting like our ayalkootasamagamam (neighborhood meetings in Kerala). And it’s because of some persistent efforts over a period of time, this could be achieved. It also gives confidence that the community would take ownership of these platforms.”***

Other major challenges include reaching the most interior areas with practically no transportation facilities and even climbing difficult terrains to reach to the community. Mentors also have to closely work with SRLMs and the state machinery which may involve dealing with indifferent and difficult people. Additionally, the panchayat machinery in these partner states are also weak making the work of the mentors further challenging.

Inspite of such challenges, mentors have time and again proved their abilities in overcoming difficult situations and have demonstrated exceptional skills in achieving the projects goals.

**\*[Village Organization (VO) is similar to the ADS in Kerala]**